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AUTHOR Kim, Young Y.
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ABSTRACT

Acculturation patterns of immigrants into American society have been examined through various disciplinary perspectives--anthropology, sociology, psychology, psychiatry, and, more recently, communications. Although acculturation is defined somewhat differently by different disciplines, it can be generally interpreted as the overall process of change that occurs as an immigrant engages in continuous first-hand contact with a new socio-cultural system. Review of literature on acculturation from the 1930s to the 1970s indicates that the multi-disciplinary approach has contributed richness and flexibility to the research. It has also, however, resulted in confusion based on noncomplementary viewpoints of the various disciplines. These conflicting views are the result of numerous factors including different definitions and conceptualizations of acculturation, ideologically-based conflicts, and disciplinary limitations. Acculturation scholars will improve their research if they make a concerted effort to synthesize the diverse perspectives and develop a unified comprehensive theory of acculturation. (Author/DB)

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NEED FOR A UNIFIED THEORY OF ACCULTURATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS

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Young Y. Kim, Ph.D.
University Professor of
Communication Science
Governors State University
Park Forest South, Il. 60466
(Phone) 312-534-5000

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ABSTRACT

The problem of immigrant acculturation has been, and will continue to be, one of the major social concerns in the United States. The study of acculturation as a field of scientific inquiry has been approached from the perspectives of anthropology, sociology, and more recently, psychology/psychiatry, and communication. Although the field has benefited from the richness and flexibility of a multi-disciplinary approach, it has also suffered from the complexity, and often confusion, resulting from the application of divergent viewpoints peculiar to different disciplines.

This paper attempts to clarify some of the fundamental issues in acculturation studies that remain unresolved and problematic. These issues include: 1) the definition and conceptualization of acculturation, 2) the ideologically-based conflicting views, acculturation vs. ethnicity, and 3) the limited disciplinary perspectives in studying acculturation in anthropology, sociology, psychology/psychiatry, and communication. The paper concludes with a call for a concerted effort to synthesize the diverse perspectives and to develop a unified comprehensive theory of acculturation.

NEED FOR A UNIFIED THEORY OF ACCULTURATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS

INTRODUCTION

> From birth to death, life is punctuated by separations, many of them painful. Paradoxically, each separation forms a foundation for new stages of integration, identity and psychic growth. This introduces a subject in which everyone is involved, in which one finds a meeting ground, a point of synthesis, of the intrapsychic and cultural processes. None of us asks either to be born or to die. Yet both are natural and inevitable separations of the person from all encompassing environment. Between the two lie many other separations, each accompanied by new awareness (Hall, 1977, p. 223).

Perhaps one of the most significant and painful separations of all can be experienced by an immigrant who grew up in one country and moves to another. The separation experience can be particularly painful in the case of a refugee who finds himself in a new socio-cultural environment, not by choice, but due to a circumstance over which he had little control.

As a new member of a society, an immigrant is faced with the task of having to deal with many unfamiliar aspects of life. The individual experiences feelings of inadequacy and inability to control the new environment. Being faced with the problems of meeting the basic physical and material needs as well as adjusting to the new socio-cultural system, the immigrant goes through a process of resocialization. For the immigrant, the new environment is not a shelter but a field of adventure, not a matter of course but a problematic situation itself and one that is hard to master.

Sooner or later, the immigrant begins to detect patterns of social interaction and to structure a personally relevant situation in the host society. Merely handling the transactions of daily living requires the

ability to detect similarities and differences within the new surroundings as well as between the new and the old environments. The immigrant becomes acquainted with and adapted to some of the norms and values of salient reference groups of the new society.

This process of change is commonly called "acculturation." The acculturation phenomena have been the subject of scientific studies in the United States since the 1930's, mostly in the areas of anthropology and sociology, and more recently, in psychology, psychiatry, and communication. As a result, the field has benefited from the rich literature reporting the knowledge and insights into the acculturation phenomena. However, it has also suffered from the increased complexity (and, often, confusion) resulting from the application of concepts, definitions, and methodologies peculiar to different disciplines.

The intent of this paper is to critically review studies of acculturation in the various disciplines and to discuss some of the major issues that remain unresolved and problematic among acculturation scholars. These issues include: 1) the definition and conceptualization of the term, acculturation, 2) the idealogically-based conflicting views on acculturation and ethnicity in interpreting changes in immigrants and ethnic groups, and 3) the distinct disciplinary perspectives in studying acculturation in anthropology, sociology, psychology/psychiatry, and communication. Finally a need for synthesis of the divergent approaches and for the development of a unified theory of acculturation will be discussed.

DEFINITION AND CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ACCULTURATION

Acculturation vs. Assimilation

The term "acculturation" has been used during the 20th century in

reference to what may be considered as one of the most elusive, albeit ubiquitous, concepts in the social sciences. In the middle 1930's, the Social Science Research Council appointed a Subcommittee on Acculturation composed of three distinguished anthropologists -- Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits -- and charged it with the task of analyzing and defining the parameters for this new field of inquiry within the domain of cultural anthropology (Gordon, 1964). The efforts of the Committee resulted in the formal adoption of acculturation as a legitimate new area of study dealing with "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals have different cultures and come into first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original pattern of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, 149). Similarly, Spicer (1968, 21) defined acculturation as "those changes set in motion by the coming together of societies with different cultural traditions."

These earlier definitions of acculturation provide a broad and general conceptual guideline for studies of acculturation without an indication of directionality or pattern of change. Subsequent studies, particularly in Sociology, have often used the term, acculturation, along with other similar terms such as "social integration," "adaptation," and "assimilation." The two terms, "social integration" and "adaptation," refer to the specific phenomena of immigrants entering into and developing social relationships in the host society. However, "assimilation" and "acculturation" have brought some confusion among scholars as to their respective meanings.

A few attempts have been made by sociologists to distinguish the two terms, acculturation and assimilation. Taft (1953, 40-52), for instance, regarded assimilation as the process whereby immigrants and the native population "become more alike as a result of interaction." For Zubrzycky

(1956, 96), it was a matter of identity; it is the extreme form of "positive" adjustment, i.e., "the condition which obtains when the immigrant group is so completely incorporated into the society to which it has attached itself that its separate identity may be completely lost." More specific distinction between acculturation and assimilation was made by Gordon (1964, 71-81). He listed several assimilation sub-processes: 1) cultural or behavioral assimilation, 2) structural assimilation, 3) material assimilation, 4) identificational assimilation, 5) attitude receptional assimilation, 6) behavior receptional assimilation, and 7) civic assimilation. According to Gordon, cultural assimilation is acculturation, and is likely "to be the first of the types of assimilation to occur when a minority group arrives on the scene" and "may take place even when none of the other types of assimilation occurs simultaneously or later." Based on Gordon's view, Hurh (1976) distinguishes two types of assimilation -- "limited assimilation" (or acculturation only) and "total assimilation" (or acculturation and structural assimilation).

While these sociologists have viewed acculturation as a limited form of assimilation, Teske and Nelson (1974) view it somewhat differently from an anthropological perspective. The Teske and Nelson view is that assimilation is a special case of changes that are involved in the acculturation process. Acculturation, according to Teske and Nelson, is (potentially) a bidirectional process and does not require changes in values within the acculturating group, changes within the out-group, or out-group acceptance. Assimilation, however, is a unidirectional process (towards the out-group culture only) and requires value changes within the assimilating group, as well as changes in the out-group and out-group acceptance of the assimilating group. Thus, Teske and Nelson concluded, acculturation can be defined according to eight characteristics. They stated acculturation is: 1) a dynamic process which

may involve 2) either groups or individuals in 3) direct contact situations between cultures. The changes which take place 4) can occur in one or both cultural groups and 5) changes in values may be involved. Acculturation does not require 6) a change in reference group, 7) internal change nor, 8) acceptance by the outside group or culture. When characteristics six, seven, and eight occur, according to Teske and Nelson, this is termed assimilation.

From these definitions, it appears that the common anthrolopogical interpretation of the term, acculturation, is broader and more general than the sociological interpretation. The anthropological definition of acculturation leaves it open as to what specific form, degree, and direction of change will occur as a consequence of acculturation. On the other hand, the sociological definition of acculturation indicates the degree and direction of change, i.e., limited convergence toward the sociocultural mainstream of the host society.

Assimilation vs. Ethnicity

Another issue related to immigrants' acculturation which has caused some confusion among social scientists is the dispute over assimilation and ethnicity (or cultural plurism) in interpreting the observed changes in immigrant groups.

Studies conducted by American social scientists on immigrants have traditionally been based on the fundamental assumption of the "melting-pot theory," which emphasizes its faith in American homogeneity. The faith lies in the ideal that foreign immigrants, given time, will ultimately change their original values and other cultural traits to those of the American society. Such faith stimulated the interests of social scientists to study

how new immigrants blend into the "melting pot" of American society. (See Nagata, 1969; Leckenby, 1974; and Jeffres & Hur, 1977, for a review of the literature.) A few sociologists have conducted empirical research of immigrants and have reported supportive evidence. M. Gordon (1964), for example, asserted that descendants of immigrants exhibit relatively few characteristics which distinguish them from other Americans; they integrate fully with other Americans; and maintain a low level of identification with their own ethnic group.

The above assumption of assimilation has been challenged since the 1960s when blacks first expressed doubt about its validity and prepared the way for a similar awakening among other ethnic groups. (See Swierenga, 1977, for a review of the literature of ethnicity.) Novak (1972) described the feelings of alienation held by one large ethnic group, Poles, who are drawn to ethnic power movements in the competition for jobs, respect, and attention. He argues against "cultural assimilatior"and advocates "equal ethnicity" for all:

> There is no such thing as homo Americanus. There is no single culture here. We do not, in fact, have a culture at all - at least, not a highly developed one, whose symbols, images and ideals all of us work out of and constantly mind afresh; such "common culture" as even intellectuals have is more an ideal aspired to than a task accomplished (Novek, 1973, p 18).

The recent rise of ethnic movements has encouraged social scientists to focus on the "ethnicity" of immigrants and their communities rather than acculturation. The cultural pluralist orientation emphasizes the persistence of ethnicity as the basis of the continued importance of ethnic groups. Glazer and Moynihan (1963) noted that ethnicity pervades all spheres of life among ethnic individuals and groups. They bluntly rejected the melting-pot view by saying: "The point about the melting pot is that it did not happen" (p. 290). Research in ethnic politics indicates a continued structure of

ethnic relations and identification from one generation to another. Greeley (1974), Parenti (1967), and Wolfinger (1965), among others, found that "ethnic" Americans possess political orientations different from those of "nonethnic" voting patterns, and that ethnic voting patterns persist for many generations.

These are a few examples of disagreement between the assimilationist and the pluralist perspectives. Though both perspectives emphasize the cultural origins of ethnic groups, they have often argued for the opposite trend - disappearance versus persistence of ethnicity. If we examine this issue more carefully, however, it is clear that the disagreement is not over whether or not there exists such phenomenon as acculturation in an absolute sense, but rather over the degree to which different individuals of varying ethnic backgrounds reflect the process of acculturation. It is much too simplistic to decree that it must be "either A or B," which in turn forces one to accept or reject one of the two positions. In reality, ethnicity and acculturation of an individual (or a group) can be considered to be two sides of the same coin, and, therefore, interrelated and inseparable phenomena. What is important is that both the assimilationist and pluralist perspectives acknowledge some changes in immigrants over time. When the changes are not "complete," it is only natural that there remains a certain degree of "ethnicity." Thus, incomplete assimilation will be interpreted as evidence of (some) assimilation or (some) ethnicity, depending on one's point of view.

DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO ACCULTURATION

In addition to the variations in defining and conceptualizing acculturation, there are differences across disciplines in studying acculturation in empirical research.

In this section, major trends in the empirical studies of acculturation in anthropology, sociology, psychology/psychiatry, and communication will be critically reviewed.

Anthropological & Sociological Approaches

Most anthropological studies on acculturation have focused on the acculturation of third world nations to industrialized western societies. Within the United States, most of the earlier studies dealt with the acculturation of American Indians to European culture. For example, Siegel (1955, v) collected and abstracted "all the major empirical studies reported by anthropologists in the setting of North America which are of importance in analyzing the process of sociocultural change under conditions of cultures in contact." Of the 94 studies included in the collection, 74 dealt exclusively with American Indians or Alaskan Natives.

Typically, anthropological studies have approached acculturation by defining the "ideal type" of personality or the "dominant" cultural values of a social system, and then measuring the degree of learning and internalization of such a value system as a replacement for the value system of the original culture. (See Nagata, 1969, for a review of literature.) Such attempts to define a normative personality and value structure, however, have failed to provide a consistent and concrete picture of American culture. Hsu (1971), an anthropologist himself, clearly points out the problem in Anthropological studies:

> What do we mean when we say of an immigrant, "He is Americanized"? It seems clear that we do not have a precise idea as to what we mean by "Americanization," nor have anthropologists who deal with culture contact and culture change helped in this regard....How can we guage the extent of acculturation without a precise notion about the culture to which the acculturated have supposedly acculturated themselves? We cannot but agree that the picture is by no means clear. We must develop a more precise idea on the notion of Americanization to answer the question at all (p. 111).

It is not difficult, then, to realize the problem in applying the traditional, anthropological approach to studying the acculturation process of individual immigrants in various minority ethnic groups in the United States. The difficulty of establishing an "ideal type" seems inevitable when we examine the empirical findings from sociological studies on American value systems. In the area of marriage and family life, for example, considerable variability has been observed among different subgroups distinct in socio-economic status, ethnic traditions, religious preferences, and racial ascriptions (Leslie, 1967; Adams, 1971; Adams & Weirath, 1971; Winch & Spanier, 1974). Even when we accept the general assumption that the American society is represented by those who are "white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant," differences in attitudes and values still exist among different age groups and socioeconomic groups.

While the majority of anthropological studies have observed changes in the culture of the target group itself, sociological studies have focused primarily on issues pertaining to race relations and the social consequences of minority-group membership (Spiro, 1955). A primary conceptual framework employed in the sociological studies of acculturation has been the pattern and process in which minority groups are assimilated into the host society and the dynamics of relationships within and among minority and majority groups.

In both anthropological and sociological studies, then, a central focus of research has been placed on immigrant groups, rather than individual immigrants. Relatively little attention has been paid to the pattern and process of changes in individuals in the process of culture-contact.

Psychological Approaches

Psychologists, on the other hand, have focused on individuals' internal changes in the process of acculturation. Psychologists are generally more recent newcomers to the field of acculturation. Most of the psychological literature dealing explicitly with acculturation has emerged within the last decade, and then only within the context of the most established field of cross-cultural psychology. Generally, studies in the field have involved the examination of the relationship between various behavioral dimensions to ethnic group membership.

In the usual case, a set of "cultural variables" are composed to represent the acculturation of individuals. These variables are then considered to be the independent variables for the set of behavioral variables (dependent variables). Attempts to define cultural variables quantitatively for individuals are a very recent pursuit in psychology, and, from a psychometric perspective, research in this area remains explanatory in nature. (See Olmedo, 1978, for a detailed review and discussion.)

Another line of research in psychology/psychiatry has focused on the consequences of culture change (from traditional to modernization or westernization) in third world countries. (See Marsella & Sanborn, 1977, for a review of literature.) Publications in this area agree that cultural changes associated with modernization appear to increase psychological disorders. More recently, many psychological studies have begun to examine the relationship between culture or ethnicity and mental health. These studies have typically focused on the inter-ethnic variations in the pattern of mental health problems among American ethnic individuals. (See Giordano, 1973, and Giordano & Giordano, 1977.)

These studies provide useful information concerning the patterns of psychological and behavioral changes in individuals as a consequence of culture contact. However, little attempt has been made to explore the acculturation process itself; therefore, the findings are relevant to only part of the phenomena of acculturation. Since behavioral changes are also part of the acculturation process, it is questionable whether or not the conceptualization of acculturation as an entity separate from behavior change is theoretically valid. Further, the social dimension of change in relation to psychological change has been virtually ignored in the psychological studies.

Communication Approaches

Recently, scholars in the field of communication have begun to look into the phenomena of acculturation. Unlike the approaches in other disciplines, communication scholars have focused primarily on the interaction patterns of immigrants with their new socio-cultural environment.

As early as 1909, communication was recognized by scholars in other disciplines as the underlying process in and through which acculturation occurs. Cooley, for example, recognized the importance of communication as "the mechanism through which human relations exist and develop...all the symbols of the mind, together with the means of conveying them through space and presenting them in time" (Cooley, 1909, 61).

The importance of communication as the acculturation medium was postulated by Sapir, who stated that "every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense" (1931, p. 78). Mendelsohn (1964) regarded communication as being charged with the task of "merging the minority groups into one democratic social organization of commonly shared ideas and values" (p. 31).

Culture, after all, is a result of consensus and a "perspective shared by members of a group" (Shibutani & Kwan, 1975, p. 573).

Most of the studies dealing with the communication of immigrants have been made in the areas of anthropology and sociology in which communication variables assumed only an incidental role. (See Nagata, 1969, for an extensive review of literature.) Recently a few researchers in communication have begun to look into the communication patterns of immigrants. Nagata (1969), for example, described the acculturation process of Japanese Americans across three generations, and reported a progressive increase in degrees of communication participation in the host society. Chang (1972) surveyed Korean immigrants in the Los Angeles area and reported a variation in communication patterns corresponding with patterns of cultural values. More recently, Ryu (1978) has reported a study which suggests a positive role of mass media in the acculturation of Korean immigrants.

Based on the existing empirical evidence in sociological, anthropological and communication research, Kim proposed a path model which attempted to explain why certain individuals display greater participation in communication channels of the host society and how such participation affects the other changes in the general acculturation process (Kim, 1976, 1977a). Kim further reported the developmental trends of interpersonal communication and media behavior of Japanese, Koreans, and Mexicans in the United States. The findings showed that, over an extended period of time, there was a general increase in the etnhic individuals' interpersonal communication with members of the host society and their use of host media, and a refinement in perceiving the host socio-cultural system (Kim, 1976, 1977b, 1977c, 1978a, 1978b).

These and other communication studies are an important addition to the existing body of knowledge in acculturation. They have provided information

concerning the underlying processes in which psychological, social, and cultural changes occur. And yet, communication scholars have not yet included the group-level dynamics of change within, between, and among ethnic groups in their conceptual framework of acculturation.

TOWARD A UNIFIED THEORY OF ACCULTURATION

Acculturation has been approached from the perspectives of diverse academic disciplines. Each of the disciplines has contributed to the field of acculturation by providing information and insights into the particular aspects of acculturation that are consistent to the disciplinary perspectives. At the same time, however, the field has suffered from the complexity, and often confusion, resulting from the application of definitions, conceptualizations, and measurements peculiar to the disciplines.

We do not yet know clearly the specific conditions that affect the patterns of change in the acculturation process. Therefore, the more general and flexible anthropological definition of acculturation is preferred to the sociological definition which views acculturation as an incomplete form of assimilation. We need to leave the specific directionality of change open for further investigation. For the sake of conceptualization, then, acculturation of immigrants can be loosely defined as the overall process of change that occurs as an immigrant engages in continuous first-hand contact with a new socio-cultural system.

The observed inconsistencies among acculturation scholars seems to be a direct consequence of the lack of a comprehensive theory which transcends the limited perspective of any one discipline. The reality of acculturation is multidimensional. An immigrant's psychological, social, and cultural patterns are closely interrelated and concurrent in the process of acculturation. In the absence of such a unified theory, scientists are apt to be limited to their

own disciplinary viewpoint, and tend to interpret their observations in light of their expectations.

Acculturation scholars need to recognize the limitations of their own disciplinary perspectives and to work toward developing a unified theory of acculturation. A few efforts have been made in recent years to move toward more inter-disciplinary and multi-dimensional approaches to acculturation. Sociologists Goldlust and Richmond (1974) proposed a multivariate model of immigrant adaptation. Focused primarily on sociological variables, the model describes the interrelatedness of a variety of pre-immigration characteristics, situational determinants in the host society, and the interplay of the technological, demographic, economic, cultural, and social forces. Kim (1979) has proposed an interactive, multidimensional theory of acculturation from a communication systems perspective. The main focus of Kim's theory is the dynamic, interactive nature of the acculturation process between an immigrant and his new socio-cultural milieu. The theory incoporates the interrelatedness of pre-immigration characteristics and the post-immigration process of communication, and between the intrapersonal and social processes of change in immigrants.

The problem of acculturation not only has a theoretical significance, but is also a growing social concern. Whether or not, and to what extent, an immigrant should acculturate, is ultimately a matter for the individual immigrant to decide. The field of acculturation is responsible for providing a description and explanation of the process of change as accurately and realistically as possible. What is needed, then, in the field of acculturation studies, is a concerted effort to synthesize diverse perspectives and findings. There should be a continuous attempt to develop a broad, unified theory of acculturation. Such a theory will guide scholars to investigate the phenomena

of acculturation from their own disciplinary viewpoint without losing a perspective of the total acculturation process.

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